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**Research Materials/Source Documents
AWARDS & DECORATIONS**

FILE TITLE: Sgt John Lee Levitow, Medal of Honor Recipient - Vietnam

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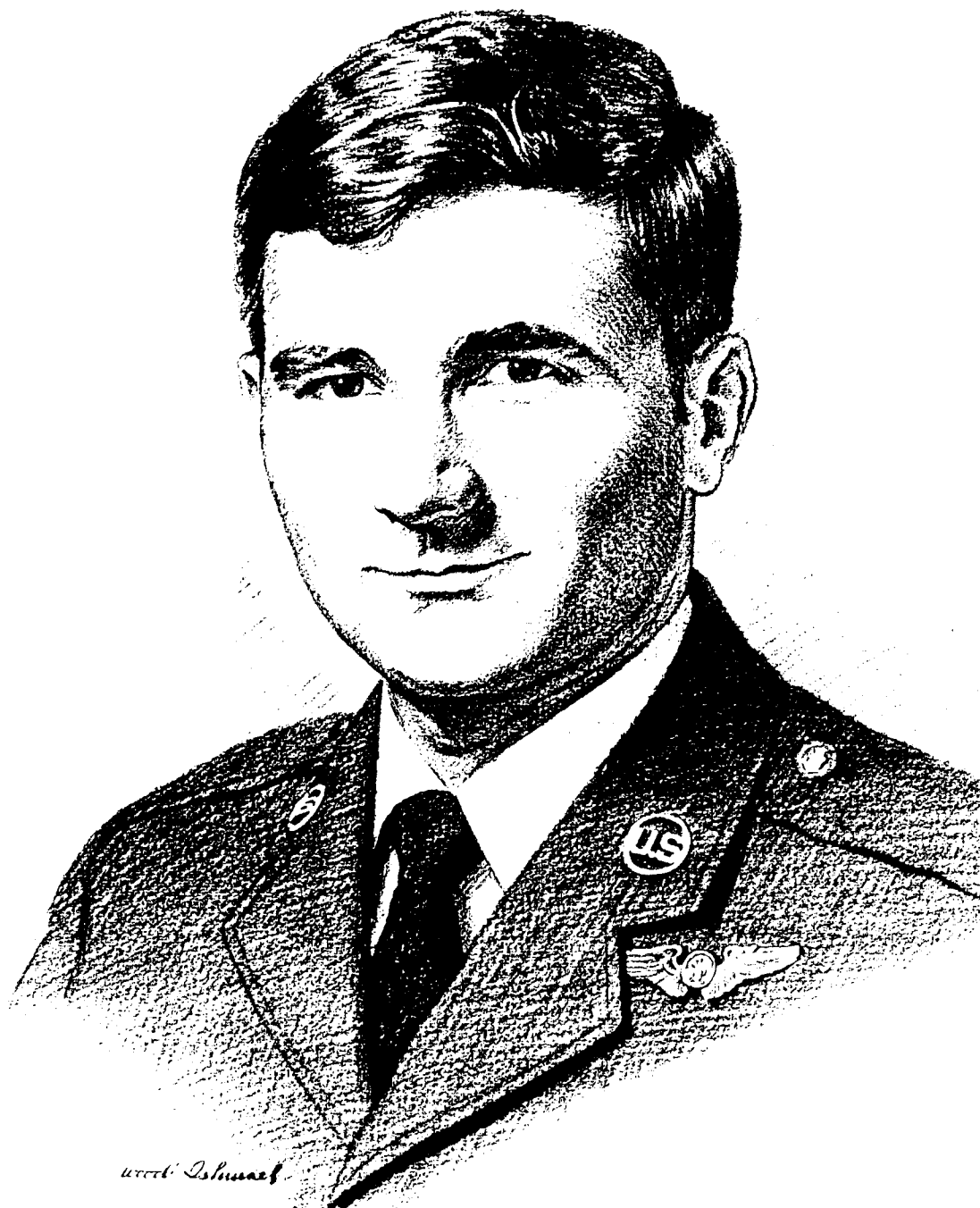












SERGEANT JOHN LEE LEVITOW,

then an airman first class, was an AC-47 loadmaster on a mission near Long Binh Army Post, Republic of Vietnam, 24 February 1969, when his aircraft was hit by enemy ground fire. The enemy fire wounded half the crew, caused the aircraft to go out of control and released an activated aerial flare within the airplane. Though badly and painfully wounded, Airman Levitow dragged himself forward, fell on the smoking flare and then hurled it from the aircraft just before it ignited. His quick and decisive action at the risk of his own life saved the airplane and the lives of his comrades.

Born Hartford, Connecticut, 1 November 1945.



The President of the United States

in the name of

The Congress

takes pleasure in presenting the

Medal of Honor

to

LEVITOW, JOHN L.

Rank and organization: Sergeant, U.S. Air Force, 3d Special Operations Squadron. **Place and date:** Long Binh Army Post, Republic of Vietnam, 24 February 1969. **Entered service at:** New Haven, Conn. **Born:** 1 November 1945, Hartford, Conn. **Citation:** For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. Sgt. Levitow (then A1c.), U.S. Air Force, distinguished himself by exceptional heroism while assigned as a loadmaster aboard an AC-47 aircraft flying a night mission in support of Long Binh Army Post. Sgt. Levitow's aircraft was struck by a hostile mortar round. The resulting explosion ripped a hole 2 feet in diameter through the wing and fragments made over 3,500 holes in the fuselage. All occupants of the cargo compartment were wounded and helplessly slammed against the floor and fuselage. The explosion tore an activated flare from the grasp of a crewmember who had been launching flares to provide illumination for Army ground troops engaged in combat. Sgt. Levitow, though stunned by the concussion of the blast and suffering from over 40 fragment wounds in the back and legs, staggered to his feet and turned to assist the man nearest to him who had been knocked down and was bleeding heavily. As he was moving his wounded comrade forward and away from the opened cargo compartment door, he saw the smoking flare ahead of him in the aisle. Realizing the danger involved and completely disregarding his own wounds, Sgt. Levitow started toward the burning flare. The aircraft was partially out of control and the flare was rolling wildly from side to side. Sgt. Levitow struggled forward despite the loss of blood from his many wounds and the partial loss of feeling in his right leg. Unable to grasp the rolling flare with his hands, he threw himself bodily upon the burning flare. Hugging the deadly device to his body, he dragged himself back to the rear of the aircraft and hurled the flare through the open cargo door. At that instant the flare separated and ignited in the air, but clear of the aircraft. Sgt. Levitow, by his selfless and heroic actions, saved the aircraft and its entire crew from certain death and destruction. Sgt. Levitow's gallantry, his profound concern for his fellowmen, at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of the U.S. Air Force and reflect great credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of his country.

The Saving of SPOOKY 71

A1C John Levitow had only seconds to save the lives of eight crewmen aboard the battle-damaged gunship.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

HEROISM knows neither age nor rank. During World War II and Vietnam, five airmen earned the Medal of Honor. Junior among them was twenty-three-year-old Airman First Class John L. Levitow, loadmaster on an AC-47 gunship, *Spooky 71*, that on the night of February 24, 1969, went to the aid of besieged troops at Long Binh Army Base a few miles northeast of Saigon. It was John Levitow's 181st combat sortie.

On operational missions, Loadmaster Levitow was responsible, among other duties, for setting the ejection and ignition controls of the Mark-24 magnesium flares carried by USAF gunships in Southeast Asia. The flares provided illumination for troops on the ground, for the gunship's pilot to aim his three side-firing 7.62-mm Miniguns, and for fighters that might be called in to help suppress enemy fire.

Once the controls were set, the Mark-24, packed in a three-foot-long metal tube weighing about twenty-seven pounds, was passed to a gunner who triggered the arming mechanism and who tossed the tube out the plane's cargo door. Ten seconds after release, an explosive charge opened the flare's parachute, and in another ten seconds the magnesium ignited, generating a light of 2,000,000 candlepower. At 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit, the flare could burn through metal. The Mark-24 was not to be treated casually. Improperly handled, it could be painfully lethal.

On that February night, *Spooky 71* had been in the air for four and a half hours when Maj. Kenneth Car-

penter, the aircraft commander, was directed to an area south of the Army base where enemy mortars were laying down a heavy barrage. As the plane arrived at its target area, Levitow handed a flare to Amn. Ellis Owen, whose finger was through the safety pin ring preparatory to tossing the flare through the door at Major Carpenter's command.

Suddenly *Spooky 71* was rocked by a tremendous blast. An 82-mm mortar shell had exploded inside the gunship's right wing, showering the cargo compartment with shrapnel. All five crew members in the rear of the plane were hurled to the floor, bleeding from shrapnel wounds. *Spooky 71* fell into a steep, descending turn to the right, momentarily out of control. The flare, torn from Owen's hands by the blast, rolled around the aircraft floor fully armed amidst several thousand rounds of live ammunition for the Miniguns.

Through a haze of pain and shock, John Levitow, with forty shrapnel wounds in his legs, side, and back, saw one of the crew lying perilously close to the open cargo door. As he dragged the wounded man to safety, Levitow spied the armed, smoking flare rolling erratically around the cargo compartment. How long had it been since the safety pin was pulled inadvertently—five seconds? Fifteen seconds?

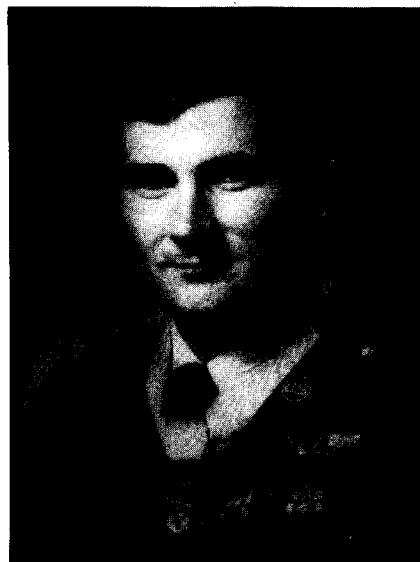
Levitow had no way of knowing. He did know that the timing mechanism could have been damaged, which might result in premature ignition. In a matter of seconds the flare would ignite, its intense heat turning the stricken gunship into an inferno.

Weakened from loss of blood and partially paralyzed by his wounds, Levitow tried vainly to pick up the flare as it skidded around the floor. The plane was still in a thirty-degree bank. Seconds ticked by. Finally, in desperation, he threw himself on the flare, dragged it to the open

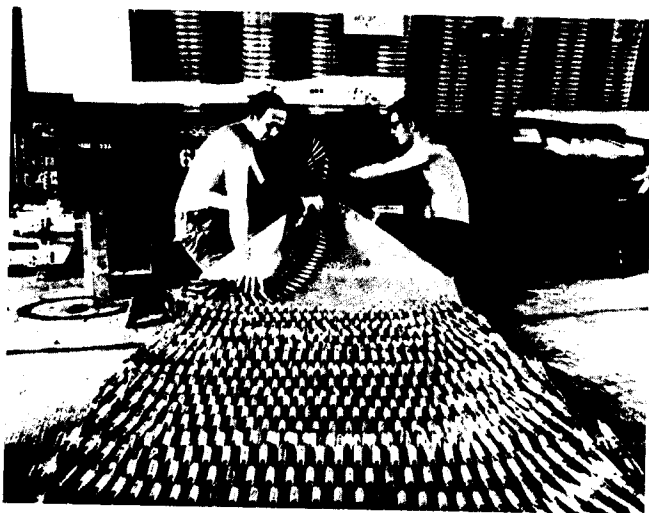
door, a trail of blood marking his path, and pushed it out just as it ignited in a white-hot blaze. John Levitow then lapsed into unconsciousness.

Major Carpenter managed to regain control of the gunship, its wings and fuselage riddled by 3,500 shrapnel holes, one of them three feet in diameter. Ambulances and a medical evacuation helicopter were waiting on the flight line at Bien Hoa, *Spooky 71*'s home base, when the battered plane landed with its five injured crewmen—two of them, including John Levitow, seriously wounded. Levitow was flown to a hospital in Japan. After he recovered, he flew twenty more combat missions before returning to the States to complete his enlistment as a C-141 loadmaster at Norton AFB, Calif.

On Armed Forces Day, May 14, 1970, President Nixon presented the Medal of Honor to John Levitow in a ceremony at the White House. The young airman's heroism in the night sky over Vietnam had added another chapter to the saga of valor that is a vital element of the Air Force heritage. ■



A1C John L. Levitow, loadmaster on an AC-47 gunship: heroism in the night sky over Vietnam.



At Phu Cat Air Base in Vietnam, enlisted armorers load a SUU-23/A gun pod aboard a plane. United States Air Force photograph, AMM

fired. The blip blossomed on his radar scope and disappeared.³¹

The B-52 was a heavy strategic bomber pressed into tactical service in skies over Vietnam. Enlisted aerial gunners also served on the A-26s that had been modified from B-26 medium bombers and aboard the Vietnam War's most interesting masterpiece of improvisation, the AC-47 gunship, known as dragon ships, spookies, or gooney birds. Later, both the giant C-130 Hercules cargo transport and the C-119 Flying Boxcars were modified to serve as ground support firing platforms.

Used extensively during World War II, the C-47 is actually a pre-World War II aircraft. The old ships were refurbished and modified at McClellan AFB, California, then flown to Nha Trang, Vietnam. At Nha Trang the ships were fitted out with three 7.62 miniguns mounted to fire out the left-side cargo door. Each of the guns fired 6,000 rounds per minute for a combined firepower of 18,000 rounds per minute. The field of fire covered an area the size of a football field and provided the equivalent of 72 riflemen and six M-60 machine guns firing simultaneously. Usually, however, targets were engaged at slower firing speeds of 50 to 100 rounds per second. The gunship carried a seven-man crew consisting of the pilot, co-pilot, navigator, flight engineer, loadmaster, and two aerial gunners—who were actually gun loaders. Unlike the movable defensive guns in bombers, which were aimed and fired by enlisted aerial gunners, the Gatling-style guns of the dragon ships were fixed in position and "aimed" by the pilot through a special gunsight calibrated so that when the crosshairs were lined up and certain speed, bank, and altitude

requirements met, a steady stream of fire raked the desired target. The gun loaders positioned themselves directly behind the weapons, rapidly reloading them and scooping up spent cartridges. Gun loaders were particularly vulnerable to ground fire.³²

The enlisted loadmaster aboard the AC-47 had the special job of releasing flare canisters over the target area during night missions. Only after the target area was illuminated could the pilot accurately fire his guns. Handling flares was always hazardous. During a mission near Vung Tau on December 18, 1966, a flare exploded prematurely, deploying its parachute inside the AC-47. There was imminent danger of the flare igniting the aircraft interior. Worse, heavy anti-aircraft fire had knocked out the dragon ship's cabin lighting. The loadmaster, 34-year-old SSgt Parnell G. Fisher, 4th Air Commando Squadron, dropped to his hands and knees to search in the darkness for the flare. He found it and heaved it out the cargo door just as it ignited. Then the deployed chute caught under the cargo door and the flare burned next to the AC-47's fuselage. Fisher took his knife, leaned halfway out of the airplane, and slashed at the chute until the flare dropped free. His action earned him the Silver Star for gallantry.³³

It was a loadmaster aboard an AC-47 who became the first USAF enlisted man since World War II to receive the Medal of Honor.

A1C John L. Levitow was loadmaster on the Spooky 71 when it lifted off the runway at Beinh Hoa Air Base on the night of February 24, 1969. It was his 180th combat mission. As loadmaster, Levitow had primary responsibility for handling the plane's load of Mark 24 flares. He set the ejection and ignition controls and passed the flare to gunner A1C Ellis C. Owen, who attached it to a lanyard. When the pilot ordered a flare drop, Owen pulled the pin and tossed the flare through the open cargo door.

Receiving a call for illumination in an area two miles south of Long Binh, pilot Maj. Ken Carpenter steered toward the area. Suddenly, the AC-47 was rocked by the explosion of an 82-mm mortar shell that had landed atop the right wing and exploded inside the wing frame. Shrapnel raked the fuselage. The pilot and co-

pilot, temporarily blinded by the flash, wrestled to bring the plane under control. Back in the cargo compartment, all four of the enlisted crew members, including Levitow, had been wounded by shrapnel.

"When I was hit," Levitow said later, "the shrapnel felt like a two-by-four, or a large piece of wood which had been struck against my side. It stung me. I really didn't know what it was."

Then Owen realized just how bad their situation was. He later recounted:

I had the lanyard on one flare hooked up and my finger was through the safety pin ring. When we were hit, all three of us were thrown to the floor. The flare, my finger still through the safety pin ring, was knocked out of my hand. The safety pin was pulled and the flare rolled on the aircraft floor, fully armed!

Levitow, seeing that his wounded buddy was perilously near the open cargo door, dragged him back toward the center of the cabin—then he saw the flare.

The Mark 24 was a three-foot-long metal tube weighting 27 pounds. Ten seconds after release, an explosive charge detonated a parachute; ten seconds later, the magnesium flare ignited, producing a temperature of 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Each flare burned for one minute.

The Mark 24 canister rolled amid ammunition cans containing 19,000 rounds of live ammo. With the safety pin out and the flare armed, there were less than 20 seconds to full detonation and a 4,000-degree fire that would trans-

form Spooky 71 into flaming fragments.

Levitow had 40 shrapnel wounds on his right side and was dazed and weak with blood loss. Unable to grab the rolling canister, he threw himself on it and dragged it toward the cargo door, leaving a trail of blood behind. He managed to heave the flare out the door, and it ignited almost instantly. Pilot Major Carpenter recalled:

After the mission I was able to reconstruct what happened by the blood trail left by John. He collapsed after throwing the flare overboard and was evacuated to the base hospital immediately upon landing. In my experience, I have never seen such a courageous act performed under such adverse circumstances. The entire eight-man crew owes their lives to John, and his quick reactions surely saved the aircraft. It was not possible to bail out as we had two seriously injured men aboard, one of them John Levitow. How the plane ever flew back to the base, I'll never know. How a plane with over 3,500 holes in the wings and fuselage stayed airborne defies description. One hole measured 3 feet, 1/4 inches.

A1C John L. Levitow recovered from his many wounds and, in a presentation made by President Nixon at the White House on May 14, 1970, received the Medal of Honor. He was subsequently promoted to sergeant.³⁴

The use of flares was not confined to AC-47 gunships. When ground forces were attacked at night, a C-123 Provider cargo transport was called out to serve as a flare ship, dropping flares over the battle area. Remarkably, although load-



Medal of Honor recipient John L. Levitow shakes hands with TSgt. Cook, NCOIC of the Honor Shield, at ENT AFB, Colorado, 1970. United States Air Force photograph, AMM.